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« MILITARY SPOUSE AND
U.S. CONGRESSWOMAN
GABBY GIFFORDS

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

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MICHELLE OBAMA**

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Congresswoman "Gabby" Giffords talks about her experience as a military spouse and her marriage to a Navy pilot and astronaut.



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Stay Safe

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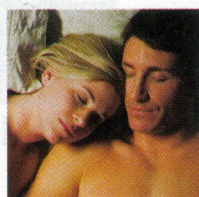
Keep you and your deployed spouse safe.



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Congresswoman's *Heart* is in the Stars



Congresswoman "Gabby" Giffords talks about her experience as a military spouse and her marriage to a Navy pilot and astronaut.

Gabrielle "Gabby" Giffords spent a lifetime in the land-locked, desert-dry state of Arizona.

So this U.S. Congresswoman finds it humorous that she's now married to a man of the seas and skies – a Naval Desert Storm fighter pilot veteran who also has been to the stars three times as an astronaut. Their wedding was Nov. 10, 2007.

In fact, Rep. Giffords happens to be the only member of Congress who is married to an active military service member. She serves on the House Committee on Armed Services and two other military-related subcommittees, Air and Land Forces and Readiness.

Her husband, Commander Mark E. Kelly, piloted Space Shuttle Endeavor in 2001 and Space Shuttle Discovery in 2006 and April 2008. His latest mission this spring involved delivering a Japanese Experiment Module, or a laboratory known as "Kibo" (Japanese for "Hope"), to the International Space Station.

Military Spouse magazine sat down with the representative to find out what she's learned as a Navy bride and how this affects her congressional work on behalf of military families. Here's our discussion ...

First, tell us about what it's like to be married to someone in the military. When you

were single, did you ever envision marrying a military man? Being from a land-locked state (laughter), the Navy was the farthest branch of military from my mind! I know quite a few Navy veterans and Navy reservists. My grandfather was an officer in the Army and my uncle, a colonel in the Army, and my maternal grandparents are buried at Fort Huachuca. While it wasn't something I searched out (Mark was the first military man I'd ever dated), I didn't rule it out. The Navy seems like it would be far-fetched, but now that I'm married to Mark, I feel like I'm part of a bigger family – as a Navy wife, and of course, the military. >>

☆ Did you know?

GABBY'S PRO-MILITARY LAW

Here's one of Rep. Giffords pro-military ideas that recently became law:

Combat Tax Relief: Fixes a flaw in the tax code that penalized military families for having a loved one on the battlefield. Guarantees soldiers to qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Care Tax Credit. Benefits as many as 10,000 soldiers currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Passed into law June 16, 2008.

>> What have you discovered about that "bigger family" - that community?

They have a solid understanding about commitment to our country and service to our country. They have an understanding that sacrifices are made on behalf of families for service to the nation. I had a bit of an advantage in that Mark has an identical twin brother, and my sister-in-law is also a Navy and astronaut spouse. She's been a terrific help to guide me and give me a sense of perspective on being married to an astronaut and a guy in the Navy.

Have you had an opportunity to become good friends with any other military spouses?

I have a friend who is married to an Army captain who was just deployed for a year to Iraq, and he's back now. It was a dangerous assignment. And Mark served. He did three tours in Desert Storm (the first one). We were not married at the time, but since we've been together, he's gone on two space missions. So it's scary, and it's certainly something you worry about. It gnaws at your stomach, and you try to distract yourself. I'm empathetic to spouses of military members who are deployed. People don't understand what it's like, and certainly the general public has little understanding of the stresses. Every time you turn on the TV and the Internet and e-mails, any little problem that could happen is on there, whether it's the tiles coming loose (on the space shuttle) or that the launch went okay. Mark's work is dangerous but it's only for two weeks. I tell myself that other spouses go through 12-to-15 months apart and multiple-year deployments.

In your meetings with spouses, what types of challenges have they shared with you?

Some of the challenges are with the school systems and the kids. There are behavioral issues that the kids have that stem from long deployments. For example, there are state laws that say a child cannot go to the next grade if he or she has more than 10 absences. But when you have a returning spouse who's been gone after a long tour, they want a vacation and to be a family again. The schools need to do a better job. The military liaison needs to work with the guidance counselor on behavioral and attendance issues like this so that they understand the issues.

Was there anything about the military culture that surprised you as a bride? (Anything you didn't know previously that you learned rather quickly after taking your vows?)

I would say the profound sense of camaraderie and military tradition. It's pretty inspiring. There is a sense of self sacrifice that is remarkably patriotic, and it comes naturally with military families and military people. They have a profound love for our nation, and I think it's remarkably non-partisan. People think that the patriotism is part of partisanship, but it's not. It's an understanding that we are Americans first. We are Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, second, and Democrat/Republican is down on the bottom of the list. I've found with military families that they are more focused on doing their jobs than on the politics. And unfortunately, I believe

that the Congress has not done a good enough job taking care of the families.

I love your wedding photos! Have you had your honeymoon yet? If so, where did you go? (Laughs) We have not had it yet! We had a great wedding. We were married on November 10 and after we set the date, I learned it was the birthday of the Marine Corps. He wanted to change the dates. I said, 'Sorry, I'm not changing the date.' We were locked in. But forever, I will remember the wedding date! I was hoping to honeymoon with him in the spring, however I was in Afghanistan. And then we have a big election come November, so we have to get through that before we can plan a trip. We also live in different states, which is a hardship that many military spouses endure.

Given that you're in Washington a lot for your job and he's in the space program, how frequent are your absences from each other? We try to see each other every other week. That's the goal. He comes to Arizona or D.C., or I fly to Houston and take a weekend. I'm in session during the week, and during the weekends, I'm home with my constituents.

What kinds of emotions do you experience when you know your husband is going off on a mission? One is fear. Space travel is



Gabby's Advice

GABBY'S ADVICE TO GET NOTICED BY YOUR CONGRESSPERSON.

Every single American has a U.S. representative and a member of the state legislature that represents them, a city council member, a commissioner in the county. It's our job as elected officials to represent them, but it's the responsibility of the constituents to make their voices heard. Voters need to be persistent and actively become part of the democratic process.

I would suggest that if their member of Congress doesn't have a military spouse's organization, like I have a Veterans' Advisory Council where I meet with veterans and get their feedback, then help set one up. Go to the member and say, 'We're a group that represents whichever community, and we want to work with you and want our voices to be heard.' You'd be surprised that the congressperson will be delighted to work with you! I think part of the military culture is to not complain and just do the job. There's more and more stress being placed on military families right now, and it is important and necessary to speak up about ways the government can support military families. So much of the culture is to do it on our own and not complain about it, but there are times when you can't do it by yourself.

- GABRIELLE "GABBY" GIFFORDS



still experimental and still pretty risky. We've seen tragedies with the shuttles. We had five shuttles, and now there are three. I feel fear and concern and worry, but it's all mixed with pride. And God forbid something were to happen to him when he's up in space, but the fact that he and the other astronauts are serving their country with honor and courage and willing to risk their lives on behalf of our nation and science and pushing into areas that are unknown, I'm extraordinarily proud of him! I knew that when I started dating him, that what he did was really risky. But I think I get that same feeling that other military spouses feel when they kiss their spouses goodbye.

How do you cope with the separations?

I go back to work because I have to, but work is a distraction. If you find yourself by yourself, you start to wonder and worry. Then you realize that you have no control over the situation. And we were able to communicate by e-mail – not every day, but quite a bit. And we also were able to talk twice when he was up there. They had a satellite phone, and it had no extra charge, just like a long-distance call. It must be somewhat similar to talking to a loved one when they're at war. In some ways, it's so exciting and such a huge relief, but in some ways it makes

the situation worse. You want to give them a hug and a kiss, and they're not there. You remember never to bring up the mundane things, like the toilet is clogged up. It's great to get the calls, but there is so much left unsaid because you have such a short period of time to say it.

You were in the state Legislature for five years. How different was that environment from the environment in Washington? Was it easier to get things done on the state level? I was there for five years and in the minority during that time, and when I came into Congress, my party was in the majority. It's a lot easier to get things done in the majority! That's not to say you can't accomplish work when you're in the minority, but it's a lot tougher. And the Legislature is smaller, with 60 in the House and 30 in the Senate. My Armed Services Committee is the size of the entire Arizona House of Representatives. So it's like trying to steer a big battleship. It's hard to change direction and change things around. But in my new capacity, I've been able to be an effective advocate for the military. The Armed Services Committee has been really beneficial to helping out the military. **MSM**